

Chapter 10

The Silence Dimension of Crisis Communication in Public Relations: Sustainability Silence and Greenhushing Strategies

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary contexts, sustainability has evolved beyond environmental responsibility or corporate social responsibility to become a central element of strategic management, value creation, and brand identity. This study examines silence strategies in sustainability communication during crisis periods, focusing on greenhushing through a discourseanalytic approach. Global crises such as pandemics, economic instability, and armed conflicts often lead brands to intentionally reduce or suspend sustainability narratives. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study analyzes publicly corporate reports, official websites, social media content, and press releases of national and international brands using thematic discourse analysis. The findings suggest that although greenhushing may serve as a short-term risk-avoidance strategy, it creates long-term challenges for ethical consistency and public trust. The study argues that silence in sustainability communication should be reconsidered not only as a crisis management tool but also as a key issue in ethical public relations practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is no longer a concept addressed solely from an environmental or corporate social responsibility perspective; it has become a cornerstone of companies' strategic management approaches, value chains, and brand identities (Schaltegger & Burritt, 2010). Consumers now prefer not only high-quality, affordable products but also relationships with brands that align with their values and ethical expectations (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). This transforms sustainability communication into an essential competitive advantage for brands, and sustainability discourses are becoming central to companies' reputation management strategies (Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009).

In this context, sustainability communication is not only a marketing tool but also an ethical contract through which the brand publicly declares its long-term commitments and social responsibility (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Therefore, continuity, transparency, and consistency in sustainability communication are critical for consumer trust and brand loyalty. However, stability is not always possible for brands. External crisis conditions, pandemics, wars, economic fluctuations, and political uncertainties, in particular, can profoundly impact brands' sustainability communication strategies and lead to the reevaluation of these strategies (Sarkis et al., 2020).

Crisis periods are challenging times that require companies to reassess their resource prioritization and communication priorities (Coombs, 2007). While both internal and external stakeholders' expectations for information, assurance, and disclosure increase during these periods, it is not always possible for brands to maintain the same level of sustainability commitments and communication goals. In this context, some brands withdraw their sustainability statements entirely or significantly reduce their level of communication. However, it is noteworthy that this withdrawal often stems not from the suspension of sustainability practices, but rather from the limitation of communication related to these practices. This type of communication practice is defined in the literature as greenhushing (Font et al., 2017).

Greenhushing refers to brands' deliberate reluctance to share their sustainability performance and achievements with the public. Fernando and Lawrence (2014) note that this tendency is sometimes associated with avoiding criticism and sometimes with the risk of failing to manage public expectations. While greenhushing is a relatively new concept discussed in the sustainability communication literature, it represents a widespread trend in practice. Especially during times of crisis, brands withdraw from sustainability communication for reasons of protecting their reputation, avoiding misunderstandings, or prioritizing crisis-focused communication needs (Mazzei, 2004).

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